

The Daily Californian

Scholar wages war against nuclear arms

By Del Hood
of The Daily Californian

"The nuclear war that everyone was talking about took place and was over very quickly, like a combined tornado and forest fire on a planetary scale . . . There was not a bite of food nor a drink of water that was not contaminated, and within a year there were four billion corpses of unburied dead."

This is Dr. John Somerville's vision of what a nuclear war would be like, taken from the prologue to a play he has written called "The Last Inquest," whose setting is an underground cavern where surviving leaders meet to find out why the buttons were pushed that destroyed the world.

The 77-year-old El Cajon man has made saving the world from nuclear destruction his consuming passion for more than three decades. He has no intention of giving up the fight.

Encouraged by voter approval of nuclear freeze initiatives in eight states at the Nov. 2 election, Somerville and his allies are planning their next move, which will be to put a measure on the California ballot in 1984 pledging the United States will never be the first to use nuclear weapons.



John Somerville

A meeting to map strategy is scheduled tonight at 7 at Abraxis School, 1366 Hornblend St., San Diego.

Small in stature with a snow-white beard, pale blue eyes peering over half-glasses, Somerville seems an unlikely candidate to be in the forefront of a worldwide movement dedicated to preventing nuclear war. But he is right there in the front lines, serving as president of the Union of American and Japanese Professionals Against Nuclear Omnicide, writing tracts and plays, organizing and attending international peace conferences.

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It's a role in which he fits comfortably. He wrote "The Philosophy of Peace," a book praised by Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann, among others, in 1949, three years after the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Somerville, professor emeritus of philosophy at City University of New York who also taught at U.S. International University in San Diego before retiring, has since written 10 other books, many of them dealing with the peace issue. His latest book is "Soviet Marxism and Nuclear War," an examination of Soviet policy.

"If things are called by their right names, the option of first use of nuclear weapons is the option of ending the human world," Somerville said. "To reject this option is the minimum requirement of human sanity."

The Soviet Union already has renounced first use of nuclear weapons, Somerville said, but the United States has never matched that pledge. Somerville thinks this is dangerous policy, entitling the Russians to think that in the absence of such a declaration this country might strike first.

"Nothing would be lost by making such a pledge, but everything might be lost by not making it," he said. "The obvious reason is that our continued refusal might move the Soviets to do to us what we would be moved to do to them if we had proposed the pledge and they had refused. That is, beat them to the nuclear punch."

Somerville invented the term "omnicide," or suicide of the human race, to distinguish nuclear conflict from the conventional understanding of the word "war."

War as commonly understood, he said, has meant invasions, destruction in a limited part of the world, loss of life but not annihilation, winners and losers.

With a nuclear exchange, Somerville added, there are no winners or losers. The planet would no longer be habitable. Loss of life would be equivalent to a mass suicide of the human race.

"If you call that omnicide," he said, "it helps your thinking."

To the objection that the Soviet pledge not to use nuclear weapons first might be meaningless, Somerville replies:

"The question of 'trusting the Russians' does not arise in this pledge because each side retains its weapons, and there is

nothing to verify except mutual sanity. If the Soviets, in spite of their pledge, became insane enough to make first use of their nuclear weapons, we would be as free as we are now to make use of ours. But the question of our sanity does arise so long as we refuse to pledge no first use."

Beyond freezing the production of nuclear weapons and pledging not to be the first to use them, Somerville realizes much work must be done if current stockpiles — enough, he says, to kill every man, woman and child in the world 20 times — are to be reduced.

"The abolition of these weapons would have to be accompanied by a moral revolution," he said. "Those in power would really have to be convinced in their own hearts and minds that the use of these weapons is counterproductive. It's a remedy worse than any disease. It's like resolving to die if you've got pneumonia."

Somerville, who was given the 1981 peace prize by the Institute for World Order, is hopeful because the world in 1962, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, was taken to the brink of nuclear war — and escaped because the Russians backed down and agreed to remove their weapons.

So appalled was Somerville by the implications of those events that, at 70, he wrote his first play called "The Crisis: The True Story About How the World Almost Ended."

At the end of the play, after news of the Russian backdown has reached this country, Somerville has his main character, Steve, a Harvard senior working in Washington, say a prayer.

"God of love, we know the crisis is not over. We know it will return again and again, for henceforth every nation that has this power will be able to destroy the world, and life, and you, unless the others who have it are strong enough not to use it. We must strengthen you, and you must strengthen us in life and love, now and forever, so that there may be a human world without end."

Somerville, good soldier for peace that he is, will go to Montreal next August for another international conference, trying once more to get Marxist and non-Marxist philosophers to reason together and provide a philosophical framework that will make co-existence more attractive than annihilating the human race.